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"Knitting the Days Away": Needlework in Margaret Oliphant's *Salem Chapel*

When the ten-year-old Jane Eyre arrived at Lowood school, one of the first questions she was asked was whether she could "read, write, and sew a little" (Brontë 1994: 45). Sewing, then, was a necessary element of a girl's education, on a par with reading and writing, and it formed a significant part of a woman's life: "one of the great silences about women's lives was undoubtedly filled with needlework [. . .] middle-class women were constantly sewing, and their daughters were taught to do so from the age when they could grasp a needle" (Davidoff and Hall 2002: 387). In *The Sampler* (1855), E. Finch, who describes needlework as "Art [which] is useful, and indeed indispensable to women of all ranks" (1855: xi), indicates the necessity of teaching poor girls the art of the needlework, as it might be the means of improving their condition and add to their happiness (1855: x). Writers of the period often stressed the practical advantages of the dexterity with the needle but needlework had also acquired associations with feminine virtues and, for both reasons, it was considered an accomplishment necessary to a woman of any class. As Maitzen indicates, "to lack this skill was to appear not just ill-trained but unfeminine" (1998: 63).

The meaning of needlework in Victorian culture, however, is ambiguous and far more complex than its interpretation as a signifier of domestic femininity and feminine virtues might suggest. Margaret Oliphant, who, in Langland's words, challenges "so many Victorian sacred cows" (1995: 153), does not seem to embrace the sentimentalised views either on femininity or needling but rather subscribes to the more critical attitudes, evident also in other texts from the period (see Maitzen 1998: 67–70).[1] Her *Salem Chapel* (1863), for instance, does not present needlework as an ennobling activity, but rather as a drudgery performed either for lack of other occupation or for money. The novel features

[1] Maitzen mentions a writer in the *Athenaeum*, who believes needlework to be "as injurious to mind as it is to bodily health" (quoted in Maitzen 1998: 67). Several female writers, including Margaret Oliphant, George Eliot and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, whose very identity as authors depends on their putting aside the needle (which symbolises a feminine occupation), see in needlework a symbol of "the enforced and stifling leisure" (Maitzen 1998: 70).

two prominent needling characters: Mrs Hilyard and Adelaide Tufton. When Mr Vincent, the new minister of Salem Chapel, visits Mrs Hilyard in her humble abode, he assumes that she is an impoverished gentlewoman reduced by some unfortunate circumstances to earn her living by slopwork. Undoubtedly affected by contemporary representations of seamstresses as martyrs sacrificed on the altar of capitalists society, he does not realise that far from being an innocent victim, Mrs Hilyard oversteps the norms of acceptable behaviour for a lady: not only does she leave her good-for-nothing husband and conceals their daughter's whereabouts, but also she threatens to kill him and almost manages to carry out the threat. Adelaide Tufton, in turn, is the old minister's crippled daughter, whose major entertainment is knitting and gossip, and who observes Mr Vincent's career in Salem Chapel with great interest. Neither Mrs Hilyard's application to the coarse sewing, however, nor Adeleide Tufton's eternal knitting, make them paragons of womanhood or contribute to the development of superior feelings of sympathy and love. By presenting the clash between Mr Arthur Vincent's sentimental reading of Mrs Hilyard's plight and reality, as well as by substituting the idealised angelic middle-class needling woman with the rather uncanny figure of Adelaide Tufton, Oliphant ironically subverts the cultural icon of needlewoman.

The figure of a needlewoman, often identified as specifically Victorian (Alexander 2003: 24), had acquired by the nineteenth century a great symbolic richness, "the ideological and cultural legacy of the previous three hundred years" (Maitzen 1998: 63). In the nineteenth century, amateur needlework, retained its connotations from the Elizabethan period with "leisured, well-bred femininity" (Maitzen 1998: 63), and thus it was a signifier of rank as well as of taste and refinement. Simultaneously, however, as needlework was a skill taught to women at all levels of society[2], it could be seen as "a bridge between the classes" (Alexander 2003: 20)[3], obliterating class differences, as not only rank,

[2] Victorian writers stress that needlework is an occupation for all classes. "Needlework appears to have been not only a pastime for noble ladies but the principal occupation, as a source of pecuniary advantage, for women, from the most remote periods [...] from time immemorial, it has ever been the constant amusement, and solace, of the leisure hours of royalty itself" (Lambert 1842: 1); "From the stateliest denizen of the proudest palace, to the humblest dweller in the poorest cottage, all more or less ply the busy needle; from the crying infant of a span long and an hour's life, to the silent tenant of 'the narrow house,' all need its practical services" (Stone 1840: v).

[3] Because of the positive associations of needlework and gentility, needlework became one of the very few possible professions for middle-class women in reduced circumstances. "Needlework's association with middle-class gentility made working in a dress-shop like a step up the social ladder for the former [lower-class girls], and only a small step down for the latter [middle-class women]"

but also the moral virtues associated with rank, were symbolised by needlework. Maitzen indicates that in the seventeenth century, when needlework was "one of the primary means by which every girl was trained in her society's ideology of womanhood," samplers were indicative not only of "specific stitching skills" but, more significantly, of "self-discipline, patience, and industry" and "other desirable virtues such as piety, obedience, submission, and resignation" (1998: 63). The "little dainty tool," as Craik (1858: 81) called it, and needlework in general, became a visible manifestation of invisible virtues, which underlined a woman's domesticity and her social role as it was conceived in the Victorian period. The association of needlework with gentility and genteel virtues, in turn, explains why a poor seamstress, rather than any other figure, came to represent victims of the industrial revolution and symbolise social inequalities. As a woman embracing middle-class moral values implicated by her occupation, she "was someone to whom readers could respond without prejudice" (Alexander 2003: 9), and with whom they could identify "either as women who sewed or as men whose mothers, wives and sisters sewed" (Alexander 2003: 9). Although she embodied the suffering of the working classes, she "escaped the stigma of being a factory worker" (Alexander 2003: 9), "presented no threat to the status quo" and "[t]here were no images of mob scenes or riots surrounding her" (Alexander 2003: 25); in contrast to "the feisty, independent, relatively well paid factory woman who had embodied the working woman in the 1830s" (Rogers 1997: 590), a seamstress "provided a feminine worker who could easily be tied to more traditional symbols of hearth and home, often heightened by ties to a past rural environment, and, indirectly, reinforced a sense of paternalism in the calls for reform" (Alexander 2003: 10).

The fate of poor seamstresses in the Victorian period became the subject of parliamentary reports, journal articles[4] and fiction.[5] A seamstress was a figure

(Maitzen 1998: 94–95). Moreover, because of the association of sewing with domesticity and domestic middle-class virtues, a needlewoman forced to work for wages, became a very potent symbol of social injustice and of victims of industrialism.

[4] Whereas fiction and art tends to romanticise the image of a seamstress, the reports or at least some journal articles present a more realistic, if also more gruesome picture of the seamstress's life, which would, however, prove "unpalatable to many Victorian viewers" (Edelstein 1980: 196).

[5] The figure of an exploited seamstress appears, to mention just a few examples, in Dickens's *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838–39), Charlotte Tonna's *The Wrongs of Women* (1844), Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton* (1848) and *Ruth* (1853), or less known *Lucy Dean: the Noble Needlewoman* (1850) by "Silverpen" (Eliza Meteyard's penname), not to mention "Song of the shirt" by Thomas Hood, which became an inspiration for artists and writers alike.

frequently depicted by Victorian artists[6], especially since Richard Redgrave's presentation of his picture "The Sempstress" (1844).[7] Consequently, when Oliphant's protagonist, Mr Arthur Vincent, meets Mrs Hilyard, "working busily at men's clothing of the coarsest kind, blue stuff which had transferred its colour to her thin fingers" (Oliphant 1986: 20), and continuing her work during their conversation "without ever raising her eyes, intent upon the rough work which he could not help observing sometimes made her scarred fingers bleed as it passed rapidly through them" (Oliphant 1986: 21), he cannot but perceive her through the prism of his own preconceptions fostered by similar scenes proliferating in art, novels and daily press, where a needlewoman was usually presented as a blameless victim of the capitalist society. Thomas Hood's famous poem, "The song of the shirt" (1843), for instance, describing a seamstress "With fingers weary and worn,/With eyelids heavy and red" (Hood 1861: 193) and stitching "in poverty, hunger, and dirt" (Hood 1861: 193) is a potent source of imagery. Victorian seamstress paintings, which tend to romanticise the figure of a needlewoman, however, might have had an even more powerful hold on Victorian minds. Many of the paintings follow the fashion established by Redgrave's picture, which "creat[ed] a visual iconography echoed in some way by all subsequent versions of the motif" (Edelstein 1980: 185) and which "embodies the Victorian vision of the needlewoman" (Edelstein 1980: 188), present a single female figure in circumstances not much different from those in which Mr Vincent finds Mrs Hilyard. They show "an isolated figure of sorrow and suffering, with only background details – the late hour as indicated by a clock and guttering candles, the ill health indicated by the medicine bottles with hospital labels, or the lack of food indicated by empty cupboards and dirty cups but no plates" (Alexander 2003: 11). The meagre but neat attic room, often overlooking a church tower[8], which usually forms the background for the presentation of the needlewoman, becomes in the novel "a shabby room, only half-carpeted, up two pairs of stairs, which looked out upon no more lively

[6] For example J. T. Peele's "The Seamstress" (1852), Anna Blunden's "For only one short hour" (1854), or George Elgar Hicks' "Snowdrops"; see the list of seamstress artwork in Alexander 2003: 229–232.

[7] Richard Redgrave painted two versions of the picture, one was presented in 1844, and the other is dated 1846. The second version includes details that make the fate of the poor seamstress even more dreary than in the first version (see Wood 1976: 126)

[8] Edelstein believes that the church tower visible through the window in the pictures presenting a needlewoman might suggest the passage of time, the clock in the tower chiming hour after hour (1980: 202)

view than the back of Salem Chapel, with its few dismal scattered graves" (Oliphant 1986: 19–20).

In addition, Mrs Hilyard, although neither extremely beautiful nor young, as it was frequently the case in Victorian depictions of a needlewoman, is nevertheless perceived by Mr Vincent as evidently more genteel or cultivated than her surroundings seem to suggest, and thus she seems to correspond with the conventional image of a seamstress, who, as "a martyr to modern urban society" (Edelstein 1980: 190), is portrayed in a way that evokes saintly imagery (Edelstein 1980: 190). Mr Vincent claims that "the most ignorant could not doubt for a moment [Mrs Hilyard's] perfect superiority to [her surroundings] – a superiority so perfect [...] that it is not necessary to assert it" (Oliphant 1986: 64). Even her "extreme thinness of outline and sharpness of line" seems to Mr Vincent a sign of refinement, as it is clearly contrasted with "the faces which had lately surrounded the minister" (Oliphant 1986: 19), the faces of the Tozers, the Browns and the Pigeons who live "[a]mid their rude luxuries and commonplace plenty" (Oliphant 1986: 16), and especially with the "plump and pink" Phoebe (Oliphant 1986: 13). Mrs Hilyard's is an "educated countenance," and although "[i]t was not a profound or elevated kind of education, perhaps, [...] it was very different from the thin superficial lacker with which Miss Phoebe was coated" (Oliphant 1986: 19). When their first interview comes to an end, Mr Vincent feels "as if he had been dismissed from the presence of a princess" (Oliphant 1986: 23) and he is left to wonder

> Who she was or what she was – how she came there, working at those "slops" till the colour came off upon her hands, and her poor thin fingers bled – she so strangely superior to her surroundings, yet not despising or quarrelling with them, or even complaining of them, so far as she could make out – infinitely perplexed the inexperienced minister. (Oliphant 1986: 23)

Mr Vincent, however, has rather "mistaken notions of himself and those around him" (Terry 1983: 79), and his romanticised perception of Mrs Hilyard proves misguided. Rather than being an exploited but virtuously passive and helpless woman, Mrs Hilyard turns out to be more like a sensation heroine, whose violent passions and rejection of accepted norms of feminine behaviour render her a morally ambivalent and dangerous character. She is not a saint or an angel but, in the words of her husband, she might be a "she-wolf" (Oliphant 1986: 106), a "she devil" and "a murderess" (Oliphant 1986: 107). Her life was one "where volcanoes had been, and earthquakes" (Oliphant 1986: 22): she deserted her husband and threatened to revenge herself on him and kill

him (and actually made an attempt to do so) should he try to snatch their daughter from her. Unlike Redgrave's "single figure," which "shows that this woman is alone and defenceless, without the protection of a husband, a family, or friends" by which he "exploits the Victorian conception of the necessity for a woman to exist under male protection" (Edelstein 1980: 188–189), Mrs Hilyard's loneliness, resulting from her desire to protect her daughter, becomes a sign of her defiance and a refusal to accept a life with a brute of a husband, and her work signifies her hard-won independence.

Sensation seems to be completely absent in the life of another needling woman in *Salem Chapel*, Adelaide Tufton. As a disabled daughter of the old minister, she is sentenced to lifelong confinement at home, an existence that can only be diversified with her knitting and gossip. Interestingly, her disability might be read simultaneously as a metaphor for an angelic woman's limited existence and for the distortion, not just of her body, but also of the Victorian feminine ideal. Adelaide is

> [a] very pale, emaciated, eager looking woman, not much above thirty, but looking, after half a lifetime spent in that chair, any age that imagination might suggest; a creature separated from the world – separated from life, it would be more proper to say – for nobody more interested in the world and other people's share of it than Adelaide Tufton existed in Carlingford. (Oliphant 1986: 25)

Her physical weakness and bad health suggested by her paleness and emaciation can be read as a distorted reflection of an angelic woman's physical frailty and delicacy. Her forced domesticity and her gloating on gossip echo a Victorian angel's seclusion and life experienced vicariously, through men. The suggestion that she exists, as it were, outside time, unaffected by it, refers to an angel's "suprahuman powers" (Auerbach 1982: 64).

Neither does Adelaide's knitting quite fit the Victorian conception of needlework as the labour of love enhancing feminine virtues. The nineteenth-century discourse presents the needle as one of the major attributes of a woman, and needlecraft signifies "the intangible and heavily class-inflected traits putatively fostered by rigorous application to this difficult and tedious technical skill: elegance, taste, and refinement indicate affluence united with good breeding" (Maitzen 1998: 65) as well as a woman's role in society:

> Who amongst us has not a great reverence for that little dainty tool; such a wonderful brightener and consoler; our weapon of defence against slothfulness, weariness, and sad thoughts; our thrifty helper in poverty, our pleas friend at all times? From the first "cobbled-up" doll's frock – the first neat stitching for mother, or hemming of

> father's pocket-handkerchief – the first bit of sewing shyly done for some one who is to own the hand and all its duties – most of all, the first strange, delicious fairy work, sewed at diligently, in solemn faith and tender love, for the tiny creature as yet unknown and unseen – truly, no one but ourselves can tell what the needle is to us women. (Craik 1858: 81–82)

Not only does Craik, in the apologia for needlework, evoke the virtues traditionally associated with it – industry or thrift – but she also represents it as a labour of love (in contrast to labour for wages, which is the domain of men), and she delineates the stages of a woman's life – as a daughter, wife and mother – by presenting different applications of the needle. Similarly, in *The Illustrated girl's own treasury* the anonymous writer extols needlework as an expression of love and care:

> [needlework] brings daily blessings to every home, though unnoticed, perhaps, because of its hourly silent application. In a household each stitch is one for comfort to some person or other; and without its very watchful care home would be a scene of discomfort indeed. In its ornamental adaptation, it delights the eye, amuses the mind, nay, sometimes cheats grief of its sorrow; but, more than all, gives bread to thousands. The women of every nation, from time immemorial to the present, have beguiled their hours with the needle [. . .]. Upon all classes and in all climes this simple instrument has bestowed a varied charm. (Craik 1858: 79)

Needlework is presented as the essence of a woman's life, both work and amusement, an expression of taste and of a practical sense. Both Craik and the anonymous author, vindicate this rather simple and trifle activity which, however, contributes to happiness of the loved ones and their welfare.

Adelaide Tufton, however, knits for nobody and for no purpose: "during [her] long seclusion, [she] had knitted as all Salem Chapel believed, without intermission, nobody having ever yet succeeded in discovering where the mysterious results of her labour went to" (Oliphant 1986: 25). Her incessant work is exposed as drudgery whose only purpose is to kill time while leaving her mind free to indulge in local gossip. In fact, Adelaide seems to be totally deficient in the love and sympathy which were supposed to distinguish the Victorian angelic woman. She analyses human feelings in the cold and disengaged manner of a scientist. When she torments Mr Vincent with questions about Lady Western's marriage she "did not show any pleasurable consciousness of her triumph; she kept knitting on, looking at him with her pale blue eyes. There was something in that loveless eagerness of curiosity which appalled Vincent" (Oliphant 1986: 442). "[A] certain mischievous and pleased satisfaction" that

she experiences in the "probable discomfiture" of the object of her attention (Oliphant 1986: 31) seems to be the only emotion she experiences.

Adelaide's incessant knitting, her isolated existence and the almost inhuman impermeability to emotion make her an uncanny figure. Her life seems to be unaffected by any change as if she existed outside time; she is like a goddess or an angelic woman, who "in some curious way inhabits both this world and the next" (Gilbert and Gubar 1984: 24). When Mr Vincent came to see Mr Tufton after all the painful events that had shaken his own life, he is surprised to find everything unaltered:

> Had time really gone on through all these passions and pains, of which he was conscious in his heart? Or had it stood still, and were they only dreams? Adelaide Tufton, immovable in her padded chair, with pale blue eyes that searched through everything, had surely never once altered her position, but had knitted away the days with a mystic thread like one of the Fates. (Oliphant 1986: 440)

Adelaide's days, where the passage of time is marked only by the clicking of her knitting needles, seem to embody the mundane existence of a Victorian angel, as contrasted with Mr Vincent's more eventful life. To Mr Vincent, Adelaide "conveyed an idea of age" (Oliphant 1986: 27) and death:

> He came away with a strange impression on his mind of that knitting woman, pale and curious in her padded chair. Adeleide Tufton was not old – not a great many years older than himself. To him, with the life beating so strong in his veins, the sight of that life in death was strange, almost awful. [...] if he came here ten years hence, he might still find as now the old man by the fire, the pale woman knitting in her chair, as they had been for these six months which had brought to the young minister a greater crowd of events than all his previous years. When he thought of that helpless woman, with her lively thoughts and curious eyes, always busy and speculating about the life from which she was utterly shut out, a strange sensation of thankfulness stole over the young man; though he was miserable he was alive. (Oliphant 1986: 445)

For Adeleide, imprisoned in her disabled body and in her padded chair, her home becomes a tomb. But if her existence is much like death, so is the life of an angelic woman (Gilbert and Gubar 1984: 24–26), excluded from the world of action and held down by trifles. Adeleide's purposeless knitting, which seems to be the only activity, save gossip, left to her might be read as the symbol of an angelic women's stultifying existence.

The meaning of needlework is, then, destabilised in the novel: no longer presented as an expression of female perfection, needling is exposed either as

drudgery and a symbol of stifled, death-like existence or as an expression of defiance. The conventional, that is, sentimentalised reading of needlework is misleading, and Mr Vincent can only find out the truth if he rejects simple interpretations. Not only do Mrs Hilyard and Adelaide resist conventional readings, but also they repeatedly point to Mr Vincent that his ideas about life are too romantic (that is, untrue): Mrs Hilyard accuses him of "talking romance and nonsense, quite incomprehensible in a man who had just come from the society of deacons" (Oliphant 1986: 89), and Adelaide Tufton refuses to invent any comforting fiction to console him: "If I were a clever romancer like some people, I could have made it all perfect for you, but I prefer the truth" (Oliphant 1986: 29). The incongruity between the conventional representations of needling women and the two characters in Oliphant's novel force Mr Vincent (and the reader) to question his ability to read cultural signs, and compel him to reject their conventional meaning.

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